

Original Research Article

A Study of the “Woman” Icon on the Seals of the Sassanid Period

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Abstract

This article studies the icon of women on the seals of the Sassanid period. In various parts of Iran, seals with various human (mostly male), plant, animal, and mixed motifs have long been used. Female icons were not common on seals, and a limited number of different examples of seals decorated with female motifs have been found from ancient Iran, especially the Sassanid era. This article studies the cause of the use of the role of women seen on some seals and examines the position of women in the society and government of the Sassanid era and its relationship with Anahita (goddess of water). Therefore, this study uses a descriptive-analytical method, and the data was collected through library research and articles on websites. Findings show that the presence of women on the seals of the Sassanid era shows the high and worthwhile position of women in this era. The woman is depicted not only in the form of queens and court women and beside main male characters, but also in some cases is alone and represents Anahita (symbol of love and fertility). In other cases, women are depicted with the child or in the role of wife or bride. The elegance of the depiction and the accuracy in representing the face, gender, and feminine ornaments, as well as writing the name of the queen on some seals, are the prominent features of these designs.

Keywords: *Icon, woman, Anahita, Seal, Sassanid seal, Sassanid art.*

Introduction

Women used to have a special place in Iranian culture and civilization. Especially in the Sassanid era, women had a high status and dignity. The significant presence of women in the works of art of this era, including seals, confirms this. There are numerous female motifs on the seals, most of which are related to the Queen or Anahita. Belief in this goddess has been common in Iran since ancient times. In pre-Sassanid times, including the Achaemenid era,

women were rarely portrayed. Despite the importance of seals, due to the existence of motifs and cryptic writings that express the customs, traditions, and beliefs of the people of that time, research has rarely been done to identify these motifs. Most of the studies are not in-depth. They just provide a review and brief explanation for the icons very. Available studies have neglected the icons of women on seals the most. Therefore, this article studies the icon of women on the seals of the Sassanid period to comprehend why they are depicted and discover the code and symbolism of the designs. The research was

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conducted by the descriptive-analytical method and qualitatively in the form of the deductive method, from whole to part.

Theoretical foundations

The symbolic image of women in the form of Anahita on the seals of the Sassanid period is examined as the sacred model of the Iranian woman, which sometimes included the queen or queens of this period. Anahita is an archetype of an Iranian woman and goddess of water who has an important place in the rituals of ancient Iran and worshipping her dates back to before Zarathustra. She had both beautifully feminine and maternal aspects. She has the attributes of strength, beauty, and wisdom and is the goddess of love and fertility. The fountain of life springs from her being, and so is the “mother-God.” Anahita means “clean, pure, and smooth,” which is Anahid in Pahlavi, Anahit in Armenian, and Nahid in Persian. Anahita was one of the many Aryan gods who fell from their place with the advent of Zarathustra and were replaced by Zoroastrianism. Anahita was one of the gods who maintained their high position after Ahuramazda and even found a valuable position in Avesta as the goddess of greatness and fertility. The name Anahita is mentioned immediately after Ahuramazda and before Mitra (Mehr), which indicates the valuable position of this goddess (Dadvar & Neshat, 2011). In the time of Zoroaster, Mitra-Mehr and Anahita were the companions of Ahuramazda and the gods of Mehr (sun) and the moon. Accordingly, the theoretical foundation of this study has a symbolic and new approach to the image of women in the Sassanid period. The theoretical foundation of the research has been compiled while reviewing previous texts and comparing them with the new findings in a comparative manner.

Research background

In a number of the different sources, the icon of a woman in the form of Anahita is mentioned directly

and sometimes implicitly. Despite the long history and great variety of seals in Iran, they have not been extensively studied and previous research is not accurate and comprehensive. On the other hand, most research has examined the seals of ancient Iran in general and has mentioned the icon of women in combination with other motifs and then classified all of them. Hence, research in this field is essential. However, to achieve the desired research result, this article uses the findings of related research (although their number is small), including “Studying the Female Motifs on the Persian Seals Pre-Elamit up to the Sasanian Period” (Mesbah Ardakani & Dadvar, 2008), “Social Status of Women in the Sassanid Period (Based On the Seals and its Effects)” (Jamali, Hassani & Behroozi, 2020), “The Position of Women in Sassanid art” (Avarzamani, 2009), “Sasanian Seals in the Moore Collection: Motive and Meaning in Some Popular Subjects” (Brunner, 1978), “The Position of Women in Sassanid Art” (Dadvar & Neshat, 2011), and “Iran; Parthian and Sassanid” (Girshman, 1991).

Research method

This is a qualitative case study method. The data, motifs of women on the seals of the Sassanid era, were approached deductively. This study used the descriptive-analytical research method. For analysis, first, the general structure of the research subject was examined by content analysis, and then, for collecting data, library resources and articles on reputable websites were used. In the last step, the collected data was analyzed for the conclusion. It is hoped the results of this study can be used in future research to recognize the motif of women on seals.

Art of the Sassanid period

The Sassanids were politically and ideologically representative of the Iranian national uprising against the Parthians, and they attempted to revive the Achaemenid Empire. And naturally, the art of

this era represented this goal (Bosaili & Toshtrato, 2004, 35). Girshman believes that Sassanid art does not represent a sudden modernization and revival; in its oldest manifestations, this art is a direct substitute for Parthian art, which was originally Iranian. It is also the last manifestation of ancient Oriental art. Although it was an adopted universal imperial art, it found its way into the art of some countries around the world which adopted it (Malekzadeh, 1975, 32). The art of the Sassanid era has a clear emphasis on the order and clarity of design and image. The royal aspect is dominant in this art and it mainly depicts the king's body while doing various acts; but also, the depiction of various animals and plants with symbolic meanings was common in Sassanid art. These motifs were depicted on a very large scale on the rocks and a smaller scale on the palace wall, the surface of the gold and silver vessels, the stone seal, and the silk cloth (Dadvar & Neshat, 2011, 39–40). In general, Sassanid art, which was dominated by a religious attitude, joined the Achaemenid art by inheriting the ancient artistic traditions of Iran at the beginning. On the other hand, it has become an influential and inspiring art and has influenced the West and the East's art, and these territories have adapted their art from it.

The position of women in the Sassanid period

To better understand the works of art related to this era with the image of women, we should study the political and social status of Sassanid women. Studies show that the position of women in ancient Iranian society was largely dependent on their class status. On the other hand, the religion of society also influences and shapes the culture and policies of a society. Since Zoroastrianism has been declared the official religion since the middle of the Sassanid period, a study of Zoroastrian texts on women can somewhat indicate their situation in the Sassanid era. In Zoroastrianism, there are different views toward women. Men and women are equal in Zoroastrian belief, and women

are recognized as Zoroastrian believers. According to Gahan, a woman is free to choose what she knows best in the light of her wisdom and knowledge. In other parts of the Avesta, wherever the soul of pure and pious men is mentioned, the soul of such women is immediately mentioned too, and greetings are sent to both of them (Jamali, Hassani & Behrozi, 2020, 142-143). "From what is said in Avesta about men and women, the equality of their rights is taken" (Alavi, 2008, 35).

In the religious texts of this period, in addition to a positive view of women, in some cases, a negative view is also observed. One of these cases is in the book "Bondaresh¹", which in section 9 states that Ormazd was incapable of creating a creature other than a woman to have children. If he could, he would do another thing. It seems that in the minds of priests or men, women were not in the realm of Ahura. And they were seen as creatures who could, like the Devilish woman called "Jahi," who in Zoroastrian myth is the daughter of the devil, destroy society (Jamali et al., 2020). On the other hand, "at the head of the women of society were the women of the royal family. Court women, such as the queen and the king's mother, were freer in their decisions and activities. They traveled with the king and attended official court occasions. Also, despite the dangers, they accompanied the king in wars. According to some of the existing reliefs, they participated in the royal feasts. These women participated in hunting, feasting, and drinking alongside men. In fact, two women became kings in the 7th century; Queen Pوران-Dokht² and Queen Azarmi-Dokht³, the only legitimate survivors of the Sassanid dynasty, became kings. The presence of such women in political circles and military fields indicates that society accepts the position of court women in the socio-political structure of this period (ibid., 143). Although the religion of Zoroaster became the official religion of the Sassanid era, three figures of the ancient Iranian religion (Ahura Mazda, Anahita, and Mehr) had a strong presence yet, and

their temples were open. Especially for Anahita, the goddess of water, for whom temples were constantly erected due to great droughts. “The temple of Anahita in Bishapour, which was located in the royal palace complex and its remains are still standing, is a relic of that time” (Avarzamani & Javadi, 2021).

Women in the Sasanid art

It is quite evident in the surviving works from that time that the artists used female icons. Seeing these pictures that show the glorious lives of women, we realize that court women had a high position and great importance in those days. Evidence such as facial details, type of clothing, hairstyle, and jewelry can be used to identify the social status of the woman depicted. The depiction of these women on coins and seals, as the queen next to the king, also confirms their very high position. In this regard, Ackerman believes that although the presence of women in works of art may be considered unusual in the Sassanid period, on the other hand, it can indicate that women have had a better and more desirable social status than in the past (Pope & Ackerman, 2008). In general, “the designs of women in various works such as paintings, coins, seals, and utensils are related to Anahita and court women. And women in Sassanid art can be considered inspired by pure Anahita, the goddess of love and fertility. But it should be noted that people at that time imitated their government. Therefore, by studying the pictorial features of these women, it is possible to realize, to a large extent, the aesthetics of women in the Sassanid era (Avarzamani, 2009, 54). Because Sassanid artists, like their predecessors, followed the tradition of realism in drawing details of decorative icons, costumes, and make-up. But they depicted the faces so that there is no difference between the faces of Anahita and the queen, or between the faces of the king and Ahuramazda, no difference. From the type of crown and its characteristics, it is possible to distinguish and identify the characters” (Avarzamani & Javadi, 2021). We see these characteristics of Sassanid women in

various works, such as coins, seals, and sometimes embossed designs.

The seals of the Sassanid era

In the Sassanid period, artists engraved precious or semi-precious stones and turned them into seals, and the general public used these seals. Girshman says: “For Ferdowsi, the poet of Shahnameh, the crown, throne, and jewels are the manifestations of imperial power in the Sassanid period.” The first two were exclusively for the king, but the jewel and seal were also used by the general public, small and large, nobles, religious leaders, government officials, or merchants. All departments, whether the judiciary, property, or war, had their own seals “(Girshman, 1991, 240). “In the Sassanid era, the seal was used for one or more of these three specific purposes.” It may protect the sealed document or object or its owner from the effects of supernatural evils, or it may identify ownership, or facilitate and certify authenticity as an alternative to signature or verification of signature “(Pope & Ackerman, 2008, 979). “Sassanid kings also had several different seals and used each of them to confirm a decree.” They filled a small bag with salt and sealed it with a document and sealed it with a royal jewel, and this sign was considered the inviolability of the treaty “(Marandi & Mahmoudi, 2017, 69).” There are many remaining Sassanid seals, which are made of precious stones.” Many of them have designs, and some include writing. These writings include the names of the owner of the seal, the name of the father, and, in some cases, his title and position. Some of them belong to Zoroastrian theologians (priests). Most of the seals belong to men, although a small number of women’s seals have been obtained so far “(Tafazoli, 1997, 109-110).

The icon of “woman” in the seals of the Sassanid period

women are depicted in different forms in Sassanid seals which are mostly associated with the Queen and

then Anahita. This goddess has been believed in since ancient times by the Iranians and in the Sassanid era, the queen is considered the earthly symbol of this goddess which can be found in various works such as seals. “The icon of a woman on these seals appears as the profile or bust of a woman (queen) or a woman standing with a flower in her hand, and also the image of the queen with the king or mother and child” (Mesbah Ardakani & Dadvar, 2008, 177). In the following, and for further explanation and description in terms of form and content, we will examine some of the seals of the Sassanid period, in which women are performing various acts, and then interpret them. Among the Sassanid seals, several have the name of Dink, which are the names of several queens of the Sassanid era. “The names of two of these queens are engraved on the body of the Kaaba of Zoroaster in the inscription of Bishapour I in the Naqsh-e Rostam” (Avarzamani & Javadi, 2021). There is now a seal on which the face of Queen Dink with the title of “Banbishan of Banbishans” (Queen of Queens) is engraved with Pahlavi letters. This lady has worn a crown that is tied over her hair with a small ribbon in the shape of a ball. This lady has worn a crown that is tied over her hair with a small ribbon in the shape of a ball and has hung an earring with three pearls around her neck and a pearl necklace and her curly hair is woven into several strands and collapses (Fig. 1); (Alavi, 2008, 30).

In this seal, the bust of the queen is drawn in profile with details and decorations, with elegance, and with a prominent breast. If the seal is used, the image will be reversed and its profile will be to the left. The existence of such seals, which belonged to a queen, indicates the special position of court women in the governmental affairs of the Sassanid era. “On this background, another seal from the Sassanid era made of agate has been discovered, which has obvious similarities with the seal of Queen Dinak, and this seal probably also shows the same queen” (Fig. 2) (Dadvar & Neshat, 2011, 127).



Fig. 1. Queen Dinak (daughter of Ardashir I, Sassanid king) on the seal, Hermitage Museum. Source: Dadvar & Neshat, 2011, 126.



Fig. 2. Sassanid seal line drawing. Source: Dadvar & Neshat, 2011, 127.

There is no inscription around the design of the woman, who has majestic clothes, jewelry, and a hairstyle. Instead, it is adorned with palm leaves and the crescent moon, which are symbols associated with the concepts of blessing and fertility. In almost all icons related to Sassanid art, women are depicted in detail and with prominent breasts. The protrusion of the breasts and the crescent moon are signs of fertility. Another Sassanid seal belongs to “Yazdan Faray Shapur”, one of the wives of Shapur III, which

is made of a kind of Sardonic agate and is a quality image of a woman with the salient features of a Sassanid “royal engraving” (Fig. 3), (Jamali et al., 2020, 149). Various types of these seals have been carved on semi-precious stones such as Yemeni stone, jade, La’l, jade agate, and azure stone” (Avarzamani & Javadi, 2021). The details of the woman’s face are engraved on this seal, and she has woven hair and a majestic crown on her head, which refers to her position as the Sassanid queen. In another oval seal, with liver-colored agate, an engraved image of a man and a woman bust, possibly a king and queen, can be seen (Fig. 4).

The image on the left shows a woman (probably the queen) with a crown on her head and pearl earrings and a necklace. On the right, a man (probably the king) is shown with a long beard and a hat on his head, pearl earrings and a pearl necklace, and a taller necklace in the form of a medal. Above the seal is a two-line inscription in Sogdian that translates as

“Endemic, Queen of Zakanta” (Stamp seal, n. d.). In a private collection in the National Library of Paris, there is a seal called Lady Hadgardokht, holding a flower. The design of this woman is like the women seen in the gemstones of Greece and Persia or the golden tablets of the Ganj-e Jeyhun “(Fig. 5), (Dadvar & Neshat, 2011, 73).

In this seal, she holds a lotus flower, which is a plant symbol of Anahita, and probably refers to the goddess of water and fertility. Her name is also engraved around her image. In a brown, perforated oval seal made of chalcedony⁴, from the early Sassanid period, in the British Museum, we see an image similar to the previous seal (Fig. 6).

This woman is probably Anahita, holding a flower in her left hand and an unidentified object in her right hand. At the bottom and left of the seal, there is a small figure with a crown on his head who puts his hands together. And on the right, there is an inscription in Pahlavi entitled Armindokht (Stamp seal, n. d.).



Fig. 3. Yazdan Faray Shapur's seal, wife of Shapur III. Source: Jamali et al., 2020, 150.



Fig. 4. Seal with the image of the Sassanid king and queen. Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1870-1210-3.



Fig. 5. The icon of a woman on a seal with a flower in her hand with the script: Lady Hadgardokht. Source: Girshman, 1991, 241.

This woman has very long braided hair and a very hedge dress. “Anahita appears in a ruffled long dress like water waves on Sassanid lithographs and coins” (Avarzmani & Javadi, 2021). In another perforated elliptical seal made of chalcedony, we see an image almost similar to the previous seal, but without the small character (Fig. 7).

On this seal, under the flower, there is a design of a cross or a star, and on the right, an inscription in Pahlavi script (Stamp seal, n. d.). “In another seal, a profiled woman is standing with a ribbon or a long scarf in her hand (Fig. 8).

She is walking to the right or, most likely, dancing. She looks like a dancing girl, yet she is still known as Anahita. This image resembles the more complex and festive icons on Sassanid jars, which were probably used as wine vessels (Brunner, 1978, 62). On this seal, fewer decorations are observed, and the woman is no longer wearing a hedge dress; no inscription or symbol is seen around the seal. “In some of the seals with the image of women, an image of a woman and a child is seen in standing or sitting positions or while a woman is holding a child” (Fig. 9).

These seals probably belonged to Christians who lived in different parts of Iran and represented the image of Mary and the child Christ (Mesbah Ardakani & Dadvar, 2008, 179). “Gershman has introduced this work of Mehr as a party scene in which a mother and a daughter are depicted” (Jamali et al., 2020, 153). Arthur Pope considers this woman Anahita (Pope & Ackerman, 2008). “The covenant ring and the three flower buds, like three pearls in the form of tears, have a history in Sassanid art. The triangular flower or tern pearl refers to the three essences of Ahuramazda, Anahita, and Mehr “(Avarzamani & Javadi, 2021). In this seal too, hairdressing and face details are drawn. Contrary to Gershman’s view, the child standing on the woman’s feet is considered a male child because of the gender signs in Sassanid art. He has a ring in his hand to which three lotus buds are attached, and he and his mother probably attended a royal feast. This, as mentioned earlier, confirms the free participation of women in ceremonies such as parties. Among the seals that have the theme of marriage, we can mention the agate seal that is kept in the British Museum (Fig. 10).

In this story, while a man is leaning on the bed, a woman comes to him with a glass of wine and a bowl. They are probably a couple, not a master and a servant. The man is holding the bowl and raising his hands as a sign of respect for the woman “(Jamali et al., 2020, 152). The presumption that the woman is a servant can be rejected by citing the man’s respect for the woman. And even according to the details and decorations, these two can be considered king and queen. The design of the bed on which the guy is resting resembles the previous one on which the woman and child are sitting. On a red oval seal of the early Sassanid period, which is visually similar to the previous seal, we see a man and a woman (probably a king and queen) sitting on a bed or bench with a marital crown of flowers or a ring they are holding between themselves (Fig. 11).

Around this seal were engraved the names of man



Fig. 6. A woman on a seal with a flower in her hand, script: Armindokht. Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1863-0219-6.



Fig. 7. A woman on the seal with a flower in her hand. Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1841-0726-154.

and woman, along with the name of one of the gods in Pahlavi script (Stamp seal, n. d.). “The ring of the covenant with Mitra or any other covenant or the ring of the monarchy, which is the covenant with Ahuramazda and other Gods, is a sacred symbol used frequently in Sassanid art.” (Avarzamani & Javadi, 2021).

Conclusion

One of the prominent features of the Sassanid era seals, which was unprecedented before this era, is the significant use of the icon of women on them. Most of these seals belong to the queen and court women, which is significant evidence of their high position and status in this era. However, few non-court women can be found whose images are stamped on the seals. In almost all seals, the image of the woman is engraved in profile and bust, and the details, make-up, and ornaments of the face are quite clear. And

there are even some individual differences in the faces, and there is a difference between women depicted on seals. In such seals, the Sassanid artist tried to distinguish a queen from others with details such as the hairdressing, the form, and majesty of the crowns, jewelry, and face. In most seals, the female gender of the characters is determined by the prominence of the breasts. This symbol of femininity can be a close reference to Anahita, the goddess of water, love, and fertility. The presence of signs such as the crescent moon and the lotus flower⁵, which refer to the goddess of water and the symbol of fertility, along with the image of women, also emphasizes this.

Endnotes

1. Bundahishn (basis of creation) is one of the most important Zoroastrian religious and historical texts in the Pahlavi script.
2. One of the daughters of Khosrow Parviz, who came to the throne during a tumultuous period and was crowned king in Ctesiphon. During her reign, peace was established between Rome and Iran, but due to the



Fig. 8. A woman on a Sassanid seal. Source: Brunner, 1978, 62.



Fig. 9. A woman with her son in Sassanid era. Source: Jamali et al., 2020, 153.



Fig. 10. A Sassanid man and woman. Source: Jamali et al., 2020, 152.



Fig. 11. A Sassanid man and woman. Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1870-1210-3.

turbulent situation in the court, she could not rule and resigned after a year and a few months (Alavi, 2008, 31).

3. Another daughter was Khosro Parviz and Pourandokht's sister, who succeeded her sister to the throne in Ctesiphon but did not reign for a few more months (*ibid.*, 33).

4. Microcrystalline quartz. Chalcedony is a type of gemstone that belongs to the quartz mineral group.

5. Lotus flower. The plant symbol of Anahita (goddess of water) is considered a sacred flower in the culture of Iran, India, and Egypt.

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